

Harris Creek Baptist Church
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Series: Stories From Acts
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Saul's Salvation

Passage: Acts 9:1-22

1 But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. 4 And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8 Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. 10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; 19 and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. 20 And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." 21 And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" 22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.

Well, my decision to marry my wife Adelie wasn't really much of a decision, because in the dating process, I wasn't thinking "Should I marry her?" I was more thinking, "Oh my gosh, if I could just get her to marry me, this would be unbelievable." Because if you know her, you know why. She's one of God's best gifts to me, and I'm so grateful for her, and eventually as we were

dating, I realized that she would say yes if I asked her to marry me. So I decided that I was going to propose to her the fall of her senior year at Baylor. But the summer before that, she was gone all summer at Kanakuk, essentially just, like, driving boats around, and I was here the whole time just planning out how I was going to propose. And here's what I landed on: I landed on contacting someone from the Baylor administration to call her and say that she had been invited to a donor dinner at the Baylor Club. Some of her professors had recommended her to go, she got all dressed up, went over to the Baylor Club. But I had a friend with a golf cart, and he met her outside of the Baylor Club and said, "Hey your event's actually been moved to Touchdown Alley, outside." So she got in that golf cart, drove over to Touchdown Alley, where she eventually saw me. She walked over to me and proposed to me, and this is what it looked like. Wait, I said that wrong! I proposed to her. Anyway, I did a great job with this. Like, looking back a few years later, I'm still pretty proud of this. Like this is awesome, and it didn't just end there because right after I proposed, I had a boat ready for us. So we walked over to the boat where I had her favorite dinner from Panera ready for her. [audience laughs] Which you all laugh, but that "You Pick Two" gets really expensive, real fast. And so we get in the boat and I'm just feeling like a million bucks. Like I'm driving this boat with my new fiancée down the Brazos River at sunset, like I'm absolutely crushing life right now. I just made all my dreams come true. And not only that, but I'm driving to a house on the Brazos where I've got a party planned for us. All of our friends and family are there ready to party with us.

So I'm driving this boat, but the problem was, this was my first time in my life ever driving a boat. [audience laughs] So I'm driving my friend's boat pulling up into a different friend's dock, and it did not go well. I'm driving almost full speed, and I'm missing it. Like, I come this close to destroying the boat and destroying the dock. So I eventually pull it back and try again and the same thing happens again. And everybody's watching me. All of our friends and family are on the dock watching us. I pull it back and eventually Adelie and I, I don't even think we said anything, we just looked at each other and switched seats. [laughter] And then she parked the boat.

See, this was supposed to be my moment! Like, I come off the boat like a conquering hero, I've got my fiancée, I've got this party, I just drove this boat, I planned this whole thing out, and instead, all of my friends are laughing at me. Because with me behind the wheel, I was going to destroy everything. And we were not safe until she took over.

What we're going to look at today in scripture is the story of someone who had to hand over the wheel of their life to God because they were destroying everything in their path. With them in control, with them with the keys, things were not going well. So today we're going to look at a timely takeover. A timely takeover, at just the right time, God took over the keys of this guy's life. We're going to look at a guy named Saul. In Acts chapter 9. So, if you have your Bibles, open them up or turn them on to Acts chapter 9. You might know who Saul is, but he actually typically goes by a different name, by the name of Paul. And typically we think that God renamed him, which happens sometimes in scripture, but that actually doesn't happen here with Saul. He would go by the name of Paul for much of the rest of his life because the name Paul was actually just the Roman name for the name Saul, and since he would spend much of his time

in the Roman area, he simply just went by a different name. But I'm going to try my best to call him Saul. If I call him Paul, forgive me, but in this season of his life, he went by the name of Saul. And before I start to read in Acts chapter 9, I'm going to do a decent amount of background and setup because Saul was a really really important person in the New Testament. I think he's the second most important person. The first was Jesus, way up here. There's a large gap. And then there's Saul, or Paul, and then there's a large gap, and then there's, I would say, Luke or Peter or John. But he's the second most important person in the New Testament. And Drew talked about him a little bit last week as we looked at the story of a faithful man named Stephen. Stephen, who was willing to step in, step out, and step up to whatever God called him to do. But then he eventually died a martyr's death as these Jewish people threw stones at him until he stopped breathing.

Then in that text, you might have noticed it last week, but there was a guy who was holding the coats of everyone there. His name was Saul. He oversaw all of it and right after that, in Acts chapter 8, it says this, **1 And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.**

So here's what you need to know about Saul, and this is confusing. Saul was a deeply evil man who thought he was doing the will of God. He was deeply evil but thought he was doing the will of God. How could it be possible that it would be the will of God to stone an innocent person? How could it be possible that it would be the will of God to divide innocent families? How could it be possible that it would be the will of God to put innocent people in jail? How could he possibly think that? Here's how he thought that. Here's how he got there. Saul was raised in a home where his father was a Pharisee, and a Pharisee was a Jewish nationalist who adhered strictly to the law of Moses. So in his household, Saul's dad's main purpose in life would be to make sure that Saul knew that anything from the Greeks or the Gentiles was contaminated, and anything Gentile was disgusting and dirty. This is what he was raised in. He was also raised in a town called Tarsus, and he was educated there. You might not know what Tarsus is. It was a small city, but it was actually called the "Little Athens" because it was such an educated city. And this is where Saul came to learn.

And then after that, once he turned thirteen-years-old, he was sent off to Jerusalem to learn under a rabbi named Gamaliel. And as he sat under Gamaliel, he learned all about Jewish history and about the word of God. But Gamaliel wasn't just a teacher, he was, like, *the* teacher in that time. So Saul's education wasn't just, like, an average education. It was perhaps the best possible education that a Jewish boy could receive at that time. And he was well on his way to becoming a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of the Jewish people. Seventy-one men who made the decisions to preserve and protect the life of the Jewish people. So this is what Saul cared about more than anything else in his life. His main purpose in his life was to protect and preserve the Jewish faith. So with that as his life's mission, he now saw this Jesus as the greatest threat to his purpose in life. Because this Jesus, he believed, was deceiving

Jewish people and pulling them away from the true faith and bringing them into a false religion. And because of this, Saul saw the followers of Jesus as the greatest threat to his life's purpose. And what do you do with threats? You remove them. That's what we see here as we pick up on this story. He's trying to remove this threat, but he has a problem. Reading again in Acts 8:3, it says this, **3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.** Here's the problem, verse 4, **4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.**

See, this thing could not be contained or stopped because these Jesus followers would not stop talking about Jesus. Immediately after the story of the stoning of Stephen, we read about the followers of Jesus being scattered, and as they scattered, they keep talking about Jesus. And we get to read stories of people being healed from illnesses and diseases and injuries. We even read in Acts chapter 8 that a sorcerer comes to know Jesus, and then an Ethiopian eunuch comes to know Jesus, and he would then go and take the gospel to Africa. So what's happening is the gospel's spreading all throughout the world. And as we learned with COVID, if you do not stop it at its source, it's going to spread everywhere. And this is what's happening in this moment. The gospel is advancing all across the globe, and Saul's determined to do whatever he possibly can do to stop it.

So he sets out to Damascus. And Damascus was an important commercial city in that time because Damascus was linked to a bunch of other different Roman cities through trade routes. Lots of things would go through this town of Damascus. So Saul likely thought, if I could just stop the spread of Christianity here, I could stop it from spreading everywhere else. This is his mindset in this moment. And this is when we pick up on the story in Acts chapter 9, verse 1, this is what it says, **1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way,** important to know that the followers of Jesus were first called followers of the Way. Because in John chapter 14, Jesus called himself the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus didn't see himself as *a* way to God. He wasn't *an* option, he wasn't *a* Savior, he was *the* Savior. So if you're looking for salvation today, it's found in no one else than Jesus. If you're looking for hope today, Jesus isn't what, *an* option on the menu of possible options for hope, he's not *an* option for peace. He is *the* way to peace. He is *the* way to safety. He is *the* way to salvation.

So he's looking for followers of the Way, **2 whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey,** if you're reading in the ESV, it says, "as he went on his own way". I love the dichotomy there. Because there are only two options in life. You are either followers of *the* Way, or you are followers of your own way, and they lead to two very different places. **3 Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" 5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.** Now what's important to understand is that Saul is not persecuting Jesus. He's not. Jesus is no longer physically present on this earth. Jesus has already lived his life, died his death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. He's no longer physically

present on this earth. Saul is not persecuting Jesus. Saul is persecuting the followers of Jesus. And yet, Jesus shows up to him, appears and says “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” What does this mean for our theology? What does this mean? This means he deeply cares for us! Whatever you’re going through, he feels your hurt, he feels your loss, he feels your heartache, he feels, he’s in it with you, because what he’s telling Saul here is, every stone you guys threw at Stephen, I felt it. And every family you separated, I felt torn in two. Every person you put in prison, I felt their isolation because I feel the pain of my kids.

And growing up, whenever I was sick, my mom would say, I would so much rather be sick than you. And I would always say, “same”. I wish you were sick too, I don’t like being sick. But now that I’m a dad, I get it. My daughter, she recently turned one, and she also recently just had the hand, foot, and mouth disease. And she’s got sores all over her mouth, hands and feet, and even in her mouth, so it was kind of hard for her to eat for a couple of days, and man as her dad, I would *so* much rather be sick than watch her be sick. And I’m an imperfect, earthly father. How much more our perfect, heavenly Father would rather suffer than watch us suffer? How much more would he rather go to the cross than watch us go to the cross? Because he feels our pain. He’s in it with us. I’ve got to finish this passage, verse 6, it says, **6 “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” 7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; They heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.**

So this passage starts by Saul breathing out murderous threats to the Lord’s people, saying, “Here’s what I’m going to do to you.” This passage ends by Jesus saying, “Get up, for you’re about to be told what to do.” It’s because leading up to this moment, Saul thought he was in charge of his life. He thought that he was the one in charge of “protecting” God. He thought he was the one in charge of “protecting” Judaism. So he was going to be the one to put away this threat. He had a letter from the high priest. He had all the authority because he was a really really important person at this time. And he thought he was a really really important person at this time, and we know that because of what he would later write to the church in Philippi. In Philippians 3, this is what he wrote about himself, **4 If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.** He had a lot going for him. And his great success had created a great arrogance. And this great arrogance was a great danger. Not just to the church, but to himself.

Because his pride and arrogance were keeping himself from the God he claimed to serve. Because God was not the lord of Saul’s life. Saul was the lord of his life. I think that’s a message for some of us today. And here’s what God will do when he sees you in your pride and in your arrogance: he will oppose you. That’s the first thing we can learn from this passage, that point number one, God opposes the proud.

1. *God opposes the proud.*

We see it in James 4, but we also see it here in this passage. God sees Saul's pride and arrogance and he comes in and he opposes him. And here's why: God is wounding him in order to wake him. He's wounding him in order to wake him. We see him do three things, there's a shining light which brings a blindness to Saul, and Saul gets up and has to be held by the hand like a child for the rest of their journey into Damascus. Then he goes three days without eating or drinking. He's got complete weakness at this point. And his weakness was God's kindness to him. This was God's grace to him. God is wounding him in order to wake him, he's trying to let Saul know that you are spiritually blind. So he strikes him with the physical blindness to protect him from something worse happening to him. He's trying to wake him up to the reality of his sin. And sometimes this is what God will do in our life. He will wound us in order to wake us. He's trying to wake us up to our sin and our brokenness.

I can think of a story with Jonah in scripture. He calls on Jonah to go to Nineveh to preach the gospel, but Jonah goes the exact opposite way, gets on a boat to sail off somewhere else, but then there's this ship that, on that ship they have a tremendous storm. And God is wounding him in order to wake him of his disobedience. But I also want to make it as clear as I possibly can, not all bad things in your life are a result of your disobedience or bad things that you do. Not all good things in your life are a result of good things that you do. We do not believe in karma as Christians, but I think it seeps in. If we're gut-level honest, we kind of believe that God will do to us based on what we've been doing: good or bad. That's not what we believe. Sometimes bad things will just happen because this world is filled with sin and brokenness.

Well, I mentioned Jonah, there's also Job. He was a great man, and had horrible things happen to him. So not all pain is a result of your specific sin. But, sometimes it is. Sometimes God will wound you in order to wake you. How do you know if that's true of you? You know that's true even as I'm saying it. You don't have to think about it, you're not trying to figure out if that's true. You know it. You know that you have been willfully and pridefully disobedient and God is wounding in order to wake you so that you might repent and find salvation. He's trying to protect you from your pride, just as he does here with Saul.

So when we pick up on this story again, Saul has just been led by the hand into Damascus, and he's waiting there for the next thing that God would tell him to do. And we're about to read about a different person in this story. A guy named Ananias. Because it's not just two people in this story of this salvation, it's not just God and Saul, there's Ananias. And we don't know a whole lot about him. What scripture says is that he was a disciple of the Lord. That's all we know. This is a different Ananias from the Ananias that was killed in Acts chapter 5, which we talked about a couple of weeks ago. And what we just read is the story of someone who had to forcefully hand over the wheel to God. In this story, we're going to see what it means to willfully hand over your life to God. We're going to see what that looks like. In verse 10, it says this, **10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. 11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place hands on him to restore his sight." 13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm**

he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” 15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show much he must suffer for my name.” 17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, this is my favorite part of the passage, he said, **17 “Brother Saul.”** He had every right to call him murderer Saul, evil Saul, my enemy Saul, but he does not speak to him out of what he’s done, he speaks to him out of what God is doing, and if God says he’s my brother, he’s my brother. **17 “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized. 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.**

You know, what I noticed is that God does not need to heal or save Saul in this way. He could have just snapped his fingers and it would have been over. He could have done it all himself, but God likes to involve his people in his work in the world, because our faith grows from our faithfulness. You got to understand this, in your life, your faith will grow out of your faithfulness, because when we are faithful to do what God calls us to do, we’ll get to see that God is faithful to do what he says he’ll do, and our faith grows out of our faithfulness. So you don’t necessarily need more faith to be faithful, you just need to decide to be faithful and as you are faithful, you’ll get to see God do amazing things because we learn by doing.

Now I’m learning this as a dad. As I said, my daughters about one-year-old, and right now I’m trying to teach her to throw away stuff in the trash. It is not an efficient process. It would be so much easier if I just took her garbage and threw it away myself. But I have to tell her over and over again, “Jacy, throw it in the trash, throw it in the trash, let’s go walk over there and throw it in the trash.” And we do that even though it’s a little bit less efficient, because I know what’s best for her. Because I want her to grow up to be a mature adult one day who doesn’t need me to do everything for her, and I know that she will only learn by doing. In the same way, God wants you to be a mature follower of Jesus one day. And it’s not best for you if he just does everything for you. He wants to involve you in his work in the world because he knows your faith will grow out of your faithfulness because you’ll get to see him be faithful. And here in this story, God does something amazing.

God uses this person that—Saul came to bring pain, and God uses this person to bring healing to Saul. The very person that Saul was coming to torment, God would use to bring healing to Saul. And I can’t help but believe that Ananias left that day with more faith in Jesus than ever before. But I also can’t help but believe that he went into that house that day absolutely terrified to meet with Saul. Because what God was calling him to do would be equivalent to God calling you to get on a flight to go meet with Vladimir Putin, or Kim Jong-Un. It was that dangerous. This was the most dangerous person that Ananias could have possibly met with. And that would have been absolutely terrifying for him. Which is the second thing we can learn in this passage, is that God will call his followers to be faithful in the midst of fear.

2. God will call his followers to be faithful in the midst of fear.

God calls his followers to be faithful in the midst of fear because faith does not mean an absence of fear. Many times in scripture, God will ask his people to do something that's really scary. He asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, he would prevent him from doing that, but that absolutely would have been terrifying. Then he uses Esther to go to speak to a king on behalf of the Jewish people where her life was at stake. It would have been terrifying. Daniel is thrown in the lion's den. David goes and fights Goliath. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are thrown into a fiery furnace. Peter is called out by Jesus to walk on the waves, and even Jesus, right before he's about to be crucified, he's in the garden sweating blood. See, in every single one of those circumstances, those heroes of the faith had concern. And it's because we are not called to be fearless people, we're just called to be faithful people. And sometimes those things will go hand-in-hand. Sometimes God will call you to do something out of faithfulness that makes you filled with fear.

But here's why Ananias was able to be faithful in the midst of his fear. It says this in verse 13, it says, **13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.** Lord, I've heard so many reports about this guy. All my friends are talking about him and all I hear is how bad he is. I heard about how he oversaw the stoning of Stephen, I've heard about how he's separating families, and I've heard that he's coming here to put us in prison. I've heard from all these people, bad thing after bad thing after bad thing. I've heard all these reports about Saul, and I just think he's a bad dude and I don't want to go. Then verse 15, **15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go!"** and in verse 17, it says, **17 Then Ananias went.** That's faithfulness.

It doesn't matter how many other people are saying something else. When God's word says something differently, we do it. Because he's our authority, our conscience, and our guide. And we're not all that concerned with what the world says because we are primarily concerned with what the word says. So even when it doesn't look like, or look right, smell right, feel right, we do it because we trust it. It's not out of blind faith, it's because we know who he is. We know that he's the Creator, and when we know the Creator, we don't really care what Creation has to say. We don't care about their opinions because we have his word and his direction.

But where have you failed to be faithful out of fear? Where in your life have you failed to be faithful simply out of fear? Maybe it's evangelism, that's what happens here in this story. Ananias goes in fear and shares the gospel with someone he was afraid of. Maybe you know you need to share the gospel with that co-worker, that friend, that family member. Don't let fear rob you of faithfulness. Or maybe for you, it's generosity. You know that God has been calling you to give, but you're afraid, you keep thinking what if, what if I lose my job, what if I need to pay for this, what if what if, what if, what if, what if. Don't let your fear rob you of faithfulness. Maybe you know you need to confess that sin. You've been feeling God's call on your life to do that. Week in and week out, you know you need to tell your life group, you know you need to go to ReGen. But you're afraid to. Don't let your fear rob you of faithfulness. Because when you are faithful, you'll get to see God be faithful.

This is what Ananias got to see. As he was faithful to God, he got to see God show off, and he sent Saul into a lifetime of faithfulness where God would do amazing things through Saul, and we get to see part of it here in the second half of verse 19, it says this, **19 Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once, he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked, “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.** And he went from raising havoc against the church, to raising havoc advancing the church. And scripture says here that the people there were astonished and baffled at what he said. And it’s because Saul, his life purpose more than anything else, was to kill the church. But then God would take him and use him more than anybody else to advance the church, and it’s the third thing we can learn from this story, it’s point number three, God takes our mess and he turns it into our message.

3. God takes our mess and he makes it our message.

God takes our mess, and he makes it our message because your mistakes, your failures, and your sins, are not final. Because we have a redeeming God. Saul knew this better than anyone else. He would write this in a letter to a church of Corinth, **2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!** This is why, here at Harris Creek, we are not afraid of messes. Because Jesus is not afraid of messes. You might be sitting there thinking, “Man, if they only knew what I’ve done, they wouldn’t want me here.” Man, we want you here because Jesus wants you here. But you’ve got to know this: Jesus won’t leave you there. Because he’s going to take your mess, he’s going to turn it into your message and eventually your ministry. He’s not ashamed or afraid of your brokenness. He wants to use your brokenness for his good purposes, like he does here with Saul. Because as I mentioned before, Saul was raised in a home of a Pharisee, where everything Greek would have been despised. Everything from the Gentiles was considered to be “contaminated”. And then what does God do out of that mess? He would transform Saul into the most dynamic missionary to the Gentiles this world has ever seen. In fact, this is a map of his life. [map of Paul’s journeys shown] He would spend much of his life in the Gentile country ministering to Roman people. His family wanted to keep him in this safe home filled with only Judaism and instead he got sent out by God into the Roman world to minister to the Gentiles. He would take three missionary journeys, then he’d take one last journey to Rome. This is what God would do with his life.

But another thing I find fascinating is that it’s widely believed that Saul, eventually Paul, would write thirteen books in the New Testament, but they’re not just books. These thirteen books, most of them are letters to churches. The very churches that he tried to destroy are now the very churches that he’s trying to build up and grow. Because what does God do? He takes your mess and he turns it into your message, because your sinful past does not keep you from a godly future. This is how the gospel works, JP shared this on Instagram a couple weeks ago, I thought it’d be helpful to share it again here. He wrote this, I don’t think it’s his idea, so I think it’s someone else’s quote, and he wrote this, “The apostle Paul entered heaven to the cheers of those

he martyred. That's how the gospel works." He takes our mess, makes it our message, and eventually our ministry.

But he doesn't just do it with Saul, he does it with a guy named John Newton. You probably have no idea who that is, but he was around in the 1700s, was born in that time in England. He eventually grew up and become a slave trader. Which is obviously the—potentially the worst possible profession you could ever go into. It's a despicable thing. He would spend much of his life on a boat sailing from England to Africa to pick up people and sell them for profit. It's a horrible thing. And as he was on a boat, we all kind of know that sailors have just vile language. They have just the worst possible language of any profession. But John Newton was something else. Like, he had the worst tongue even on his boat. Multiple times, he'd be admonished by his captain for making up words for debauchery. He was that bad with his words. But then eventually, as he was on a boat, one day there was a storm, and it was almost like God was wounding him in order to wake him. And he didn't know God at the time, but in the middle of this storm, he called out "Lord have mercy on us!" And the whole boat was saved that day, and then eventually he was saved as well, spiritually. And he would eventually go on to leave the slave trade and work heartily to stop it. But it's not just that. He went from having the worst tongue of any sailor to writing these words: "Amazing grace. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

Later in his life he'd eventually lose much of his memory, but even till his dying days, he would say this, he'd say, "I've remembered two things. One, that I'm a great sinner. Two, Christ is a great Savior." Because those who are most attuned to their sin are most aware of their Savior. Because those people who now they have a mess, who have allowed God to turn it into their message, they're more grateful for Jesus because they know who they are. It's true of Saul, it's true of John Newton, and it can be true of you as well.

So in summary, point number one, God opposes the proud. Point number two, God calls his followers to be faithful in the midst of fear. And point number three, God takes our mess and makes it our message. And you know, typically when this scripture is preached, the story goes something like this: it is absolutely shocking that God saved Paul. It's shocking that Saul was saved on that day because if you were to make a list of every single Jewish person who would be saved, Saul would be dead last. He was the worst of the worst of the worst, and it's shocking that God saved Saul. So the application is typically something like, "Think of the worst person you know, the person who's farthest away from God and share the gospel with them and pray for them." That is absolutely an application of this message. It's just not necessarily my takeaway from this message. Cause my takeaway from this message came when I was just talking to God about this scripture, and I was just saying, "God, I am shocked that you saved Saul. He was the worst of the worst. He was a murderer, he persecuted your church. He was a horrible person, and yet you saved him. I am shocked that Saul was saved by you." And in that moment, I just felt like the Holy Spirit was telling me, "Nate you're only shocked that I saved Saul because you're not shocked that I saved you."

Because you see, we put people into these different camps. There are these people who are really really bad when they come to know Jesus, that salvation is shocking. Then there's others of us,

there's me who has been saved for years, been in church for years, and God's just kind of lucky to have us. But what you've got to understand is that Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus is not anymore shocking or anymore dramatic than my conversion in a balcony in a Lutheran church in Bloomington, Minnesota. Because Saul's conversion story is not a story of a bad person becoming good. And my conversion story is not of a good person becoming even better. Both stories are the same story. They are of dead people finding life. And Saul knew this better than anybody else. He'd eventually write this to the church in Ephesus, he'd say this in Ephesians 2, **1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace that you have been saved.** Come on! [applause]

Some of you have been trying to be in control of your life for far too long. You've been trying to control your career, you've been trying to control what people think of you, you've been trying to control your finances, you've been trying to control your kids, you've been trying to control your safety. You've even been trying to control your salvation. You're thinking, if I could just do enough good works, if I could just be in church enough, then maybe then I can be saved. You're trying to control your salvation. Friend, you can't control it. Because your salvation is not something that's earned, it's something that's received, your salvation is God's gift to you, as he sent his one and only son to die for you so that while you were dead, you could be made alive in Christ Jesus. It's not anything you've done, it's everything that he's done. The only thing you've done is disobey. The only thing he's done is save. And when you know that, like, really know it, when you know your sin, when you know your shame, and when you really really know your brokenness, you really really get to see his beauty. Because, praise God, there is an amazing grace that did not just save a wretch like Saul, he saved a wretch like you. He saved a wretch like me. And let me remind you, wretches aren't very good drivers. If you're behind the wheel of your life, you're going to destroy it. But instead, if you allow him to take over everything, all your dreams, desires, and destiny, he's going to do more than you could possibly ask or imagine. This is what he does. He did it through Saul, he did it through John Newton, and he wants to do it with you. Let me pray that it be true of us today.

Father, thank you for your forgiveness. I know so many of us have been raised to believe, whether it's through families or through jobs or different relationships, that we have to do enough good stuff to be accepted in love. Father, thank you that you accept even the worst of us. Thank you that we're forgiven even for what we did last night, something that we said this morning, you no longer count our sins against us because of what you've done on the cross through your son Jesus. And God, thank you for the example of Ananias. God, I just love his faith in this story. I pray that we'd be faithful people who would just do what you ask us to do. That we would be willing to go anywhere and say anything to anyone at anytime because we trust your word over the opinions of this world. And Father, would we never ever ever get used to the story of our salvation. Whether our story was as dramatic as a light appearing on the road

to Damascus, or whether it's been, "Man, I feel like I've known Jesus my whole life." No matter what it is, I pray that we'd be reminded of that in this moment. Whether it was a sermon they heard, or a friend who shared the gospel with them, would we remember that time when Jesus stepped in and saved us. When we were without hope, he gave us a hope and a future. So Father, would our takeaway from this sermon not just be man, if you can save Saul, you can save anybody, but instead Father if you could save me, you could save anybody. And may we really know our sins so we might really know our Savior. And Father, I just pray that you bring salvation in this room. Man, I know there are people here today and watching online who don't know you. I pray that they just be flooded with the love of your Holy Spirit. Would they know that you see them, you love them, and you want what's best for them, and Father more than anything else, we just want to worship you now. Because you are alive, and you're with us, and you're for us. It's in Jesus name we pray. Amen.